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HISTORY AND THE HUMANITIES AT RICE BETWEEN TWO WARS

by

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PART I

"If you are not now college educated, it is difficult to explain your presence here, for graduation from Rice is the result of no accident or happy oversight on the part of the authorities, but of serious tasks, faithfully performed. It is hard to get in here, harder to stay in, and hardest to get out with an academic degree. Rice is completing only the thirteenth year of its active existence, but it is already distinguished among the schools and colleges of America, and when your children are ready for graduation it will be known universally as a place where a diploma signifies an education. You are being graduated from a college over whose portals is written in invisible letters: 'No loafers allowed; they who are seeking lotus land should pass on.'" (1) I begin my observations this evening with the first paragraph of the address delivered at the tenth commencement convocation of the Rice Institute, held on Monday morning, June 8,

1925, at nine o'clock. The speaker is Stockton Axson, professor of English, Literature at the Institute and the founder of the Rice English Department. In this address he sketched the condition and limitations of our school in that day and with prescient vision gave an indication of the school that was to be.

The period between two wars with which I am concerned this evening was not a lush time of plenty. Its overriding central historical feature was the Great Depression flanked by the unsettled state resulting from the First War on the one hand and the even greater upheaval caused by entrance into the Second War on the other. It was as if Phlegethon were running between Scylla and Charybdis. I hope my classical simile is an exaggeration, but in point of serious fact this was a time of limited resources both financial and in faculty. These somewhat straitened circumstances were notably evident in History and the Humanities in general. At no time were these departments able to develop large programs of research activity but their energies were chiefly confined to instruction and occasional publication, some of which, however, was notable.

In general, President Lovett sought to support the larger reputation of the Institute in the outer academic world through the introduction of distinguished scholars of national and international reputation who gave series of lectures of the highest standard which found publication in the Rice Institute Pamphlet. The files of this unusual journal for the quarter century extending from about 1918 to 1943 constitute my basic source material. The many lecture series, commencement addresses, baccalaureate sermons and other matter of academic record contained here form an exceptionally varied documentation for the intellectual and cultural history of the time. The volume is much too large for me to do more than dip into this reservoir in a highly selective manner.

First it should be noted that President Lovett sought to supplement financial needs for this purpose by interesting citizens of wealth and discrimination who might wish to contribute to these subsidiary intellectual goals of the school. Most notable of the special provision for these ends were the Sharp Foundation, the Godwin Foundation, the Rockwell Foundation, and the Rice Institute Lectureship in Music. The Sharp Foundation was donated in June, 1918, by Mrs. Estelle B. Sharp whose deep sense of social obligation had already led her to undertake the organization of a Texas School of Civics and Philanthropy in which members of the Rice faculty gave lectures. Professor Tsanoff was among this number. It was the design of the school to train Southern social workers for social welfare work in the South. But believing it essential to place the academic training of these social workers on a graduate basis, she decided to transfer the work of this school to the Rice Institute and accordingly created the Sharp Foundation. (2) The greater part of this gift provided the Sharp Lectureship in Civics and Philanthropy which was held by Dr. John Willis Slaughter throughout this interwar period and which formed the historical base from which our behavioral science departments derive. Dr. Slaughter's duties were not limited to university instruction since his energies were diffused throughout nearly all the social and charitable agencies of that day. There was little in those areas that his hand did not touch. In addition, the Sharp Foundation provided funds to attract outside lecturers and among these scholars of the highest distinction.

The Sharp Lectureship was inaugurated by Sir Henry Jones, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, with a series of three lectures on "The Obligations and Privileges of Citizenship--A Plea for the Study of Social Science," delivered at the Rice Institute during the visit of the British Educational Mission on November 27, 28 and 29, 1918.

The dominant preoccupation of this period centered on the project of the formation of a League of Nations, and this subject assumed a prominent place in the conferences and seminars held in conjunction with the mission. Among lectures dealing with the League were a paper prepared by Miss Rose Sidgwick, Lecturer on Ancient History at the University of Birmingham, who died in New York, a victim of the influenza epidemic, on December 28, 1918, before she could return to England with the mission. Among American participants in the conferences was Raleigh Colston Minor, Professor of Constitutional and International Law at the University of Virginia, who presented a lecture entitled "A Republic of Nations," while a subject of tangential interest was a paper on "The Teaching and Study of History after the War" by the distinguished medievalist of Princeton University, Professor Dana Carleton Munro.

Similarly through the generosity of Mr. Herbert Godwin, whose slender patrician figure was frequently seen on occasions of cultural moment at the Institute, a gift was made establishing a Foundation primarily for lectures of public significance by outstanding public personalities connected with affairs of state. Two inaugural lectures were given on the Godwin Foundation by the Hon. William Howard Taft, twenty-seventh president of the United States on April 21-22, 1920. The ensuing year on May 12-13, 1921, a second course of Godwin lectures was given by the Right Honorable, Sir Auckland Geddes, British Ambassador to the United States. These lectures were occasions of such general public interest that they were given at the City Auditorium before large audiences. The old Auditorium was a place of public assemblage that outrivalled its present successor, the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, always bearing in mind the lesser proportions of that time, and the impact of the Institute upon public awareness was commensurate.

The presence of President Taft under Institute

auspices deserves passing reflection. His address on "The Conservation of Republican Institutions" is not a masterpiece of literature but it is a document of the social and economic climate prevailing nearly fifty years ago. You get the message loud and clear. Let me quote: "I am here to defend capitalistic society. It rests on the right of property and individual liberty. Can you conceive of individual liberty without the right of property? Just think it over. What is the right of property? It is the right to enjoy your own earnings, to appropriate them to yourself, to use them for what you will. It is the right to save them if you will by the exercise of self-restraint and thrift, and then apply them to what? Apply them to the increase of the product of manual labor. The right of property stimulates industry. It stimulates thrift and saving, and it stimulates invention and the genius of organization." (3) and again continuing he remarked: "If we are comfortable and are able to earn our living and are able to live comfortably, it is not an injury to have another man have more money than we have." (4) There is little doubt, I feel certain, that this was the predominating philosophy in Mr. Godwin's Houston when the vision of the Twentieth Century and its promise of achievement came into focus, and it represented the hard work, thrift and saving that made Mr. Rice's benefaction possible. It may be noted that these words were spoken against the background of emergent Bolshevism in Russia and the impact of the Boston Police Strike that indirectly paved the way to the presidency for Calvin Coolidge. The lectures by Sir Auckland Geddes the following year reflected the continuing preoccupation with the problems raised by the First War, its deeper causes and the permanent issues of the peace. An interesting feature incidental to Sir Auckland's visit was the endowment of the prize in writing bearing the name of Lady Geddes that still appears on the annual list of commencement awards.

One of the most distinguished series of lectures given at the Rice Institute was delivered on the Sharp Foundation on September 30, and October 1 and 2, 1925, by Terrot Reaveley Glover, Fellow and Classical Lecturer in St. Johns College, Cambridge, and Public Orator in the University. Glover was a towering figure in classical studies at a time when Greek and Latin letters were graced with the most exacting scholarship. His magnificent familiarity with the ancient tongues enabled him to work with the utmost ease and assurance. His style of composition was remarkable since he wrote squarely out of the original sources in a manner that falls only slightly short of translation. Glover came here in my first autumn at the Institute upon the immediate opening of school and left an indelible impression upon me. He was a large man, bluff and hearty in manner with a florid complexion and blurry roast-beef-and-ale accent. Although I had just completed the experience of several years accustoming myself to English as spoken at Cambridge on the Charles, I was unprepared to understand English as spoken at Cambridge on the Cam. However, it was clear that T. R. Glover took great pride in his English race, loved to travel in the more purely English portions of the Empire, Australia, Canada and America, which last he seemed to regard affectionately as a member state still, somewhat recalcitrant but nevertheless in good standing, and that he was a Baptist who could read Greek and Latin with the best in a predominantly Anglican environment. Also he told Dr. Lovett that as public orator of the University his post was characteristically British being wholly nominal and in no wise forensic.

The lecture series on "Democracy in the Ancient Greek World" was published in the Rice Institute Pamphlet in 1925 and by the Cambridge University Press in 1927 as the first part of his expanded work on Ancient Democracy including Rome. These lectures provide a beautiful revelation of Glover's talent, his historical acumen and prescience. In the waning

autumn of Wilsonian liberalism and, like Geddes, with vivid awareness of the recent war and the problems it had brought, he writes as if scanning Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War at his elbow, and indeed the lectures are almost a cento from Thucydides, Polybius, and the Politics of Aristotle. "What can be done with a world that keeps changing? Can you stabilize life and society? or had you better change? and the crucial question is change what? Sparta tried to stabilize herself, and her history suggests an antithesis to the Frenchman's aphorism--the more it is the same thing, the more it changes...Then, if it is to be adjustment, where will you begin? What will you change? What can you change?" (5) He asks the right question and we haven't found the answers. With the Funeral Oration of Pericles in his thoughts with its unsurpassed encomium of democracy, Glover writes: "I have sometimes heard it suggested that America is a democracy, but it is only too plain that the word has changed its meaning. I hear of a President of the United States; there was none in Athens. I hear of a Supreme Court, and of judges there, who can overturn the laws and frustrate beyond recall the will of the American people. (Let me interpose this was a Taft-McReynolds, not a Warren-Douglas court.) That humiliation never overtook the Athenian people for they were their own Supreme Court. If they had no Jefferson, neither had they a Marshall. America lacks the two essential qualities of a democracy; the people there neither make the laws nor interpret them. There is no Assembly in America. It is vain to tell me that you have improved on ancient democracy; the Athenians would not allow you the boast." (6) Glover is right. Our Founding Fathers drew their inspiration from the principles of mixed government, the polity of Aristotle, or even more from Polybius. Our governmental form is still of the mixed type rather than democratic. Even Jefferson seems to stress the aristocratic element in the mixis in his letter to John Adams advocating an Aristocracy of Virtue and Talent. Also in Athenian thinking democracy conveys overtones

not always perceived in modern politics, for Glover continues: "The spirit of Democracy, as we find it in Athens, is belief in man. It may be said that this was also the faith of Jefferson, and that it underlies the American belief in popular government. So far there is coincidence. But Pericles seems to lay more stress than is suggested by the words of some other democratic leaders, or by their conduct, upon the duty as well as the right of the citizen to govern and to think out each situation in full, beside cherishing his faith in his fellow-citizens and the general scheme of government. No scheme of government is of much use unless it is maintained by people who think." (7) The implication is unmistakable that without character and intelligence, without recognition of duty and right reason in thinking, no people is fit to govern either itself or others and the corollary follows that in the long run every people gets precisely the sort of government it deserves, especially in a democracy. And finally I will quote Glover for a last time where, with an insight derived from the genius of Thucydides and Aristotle, he enunciates an axiom of politics that should be taken to heart most deeply: "Nations break down abroad, but they are ruined at home. It is foreign policy that finds out the weakness of our theories...Utopias are wrecked on foreign policy...A breakdown in foreign policy betrays weakness at home--even failure to realize and to understand, some defect in training or temper, something intellectually or morally wrong, undeveloped or perverted." (8)

There were far too many fine lectures presented at Rice in the middle years of the interwar period for me to do more than pause for occasional glimpses. Perhaps none was more controversial and gave rise to more honest difference of opinion than the address on "The Limitations of Democracy" delivered at the fifteenth commencement convocation (June 9, 1930) by Ralph Adams Cram of Boston, Supervising Architect of the Rice Institute. This commencement was also the occasion

of the unveiling of the statue of William Marsh Rice by John Angel which now graces our mid-campus. Mr. Cram was a man of fine artistic sensibility, of strong Catholic conviction who awaited a new age of faith with the return of medieval aspiration, and a man who felt an instinctive revulsion against popular government dominated by the masses at the lower levels. With the Bolshevik revolution only some twelve years gone by, with Hitler imminent in Germany, and apprehensive of popular unrest in the western democracies moving toward depression, Cram hurled the challenge of aristocratic standards in art, religion and politics against a popular Protestant and democratic order. He was appalled by the delusions of grandeur entertained by the masses of humanity that form the so-called civilized states of our day, delusions that persuade them of their supremacy, "not only over all other forms of creation, but over all peoples of the past." Continuing he asserted: "Protestant and democratic philosophy, working in perfect unity of purpose and method, have broken down all the barriers between degrees of character and capacity, have destroyed the sense of varied values and have established the regime of quantitative in place of qualitative standards...All men from the venal racketeer and the venal politician to the artist, the philosopher, and the prophet are assumed to be not only free but equal; equal in ability, in intelligence and character." He concluded that one result of this is "the reaction towards an autocracy of manual laborers with the disenfranchisement of intellect and high character and their reduction to serfdom, the other is the reaction towards absolutism where the will of one man is supreme." (9)

The position here set forth by Cram is not, however, solely a response to the disintegrating forces evident in the world of emergent totalitarian regimes but is also expressed in terms of Aristotelian ideals of qualitative excellence. As in the entire theory of distributive justice real equality consists not in an even numerical ordering but in an arrangement proportioned to the degrees of character and intelligence. Further

equality of opportunity does not imply equality of achievement in education, science or art. All depends on the quality of the individual. He maintains Aristotle's principle that "Advantage should stand to advantage in quantity as man stands to man in quality." (10) This position approximates much more closely to Jefferson's aristocracy of virtue and talents than to the absolute numerical equality of Jackson and the frontier where, as the adage ran, the rifle makes every man equally tall and equally wise. Today we are told that the Bomb, is the great equalizer that equates barbarism with civilization. Cram apprehended that the popular movements of the day such as Bolshevism and Fascism signalled the emergence either of the dictatorship of the mass-man or the return of the Byzantine autocrat, the Sebastocrator and Panhypersebastos, already materialized in imperial Germany's "All Highest." His artistic sensitiveness attuned delicately to nuances and degrees of quality altogether rejected the idea that there are no grades of excellence. He knew that not every man can write a Devine Comedy or even conceive a Lovett Hall as he had done himself.

Time does not permit further elaboration of this vital subject, as vital today as when he spoke these words and angrily shook his fist on the commencement platform at the forces of ignorance and evil, all that imponderable mass of modern Neanderthals who would reduce all excellences to a level of dismal mediocrity. Those who wish to know more about the man who conceived the original plan and structures of beauty for our Rice campus can discover his artistic vision in his book on The Substance of Gothic and his opinions, social and political, in the essays entitled Convictions and Controversies and The End of Democracy. One final extract from the address has caused me to consider well, since it seems to me apposite relative to many situations that beset contemporary society. "There is nothing more tragic than a honest and well-meaning, but only crudely developed man, forced into a place he ought

not to occupy and burdened by opportunities and obligations that are beyond his powers and that he ought not to be forced to assume." (11)

Footnotes.

1. The Rice Institute Pamphlet, XII, 3 (July, 1925), 183.
2. See Pamph., V, 3 (July, 1918), 156-158.
3. Pamph., VII, 2 (April, 1920), 76.
4. Ibid., 83.
5. Ibid., XII, 4 (Oct., 1925), 218.
6. Ibid., 251.
7. Ibid., 258-259
8. Ibid., 273-274.
9. Ibid., XVII, 3 (July, 1930), 183-184.
10. See Sir Paul Vinogradoff, Outlines of Historical Jurisprudence (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1922), II, 48.
11. Pamph. XVII, 3 (July, 1930), 182-183.

Because of problems of space it was not practicable to publish the entire address in one issue. It has therefore been divided into two parts and the second part will appear in the April issue of the FLYLEAF.

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